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ABILENE, TEXS

Greg Jaklewicz: Published author, 11, reflects on her long career



Greg Jaklewicz photo Author Vicky Gao, 11, laughs at fun poked at all of the authors during Tuesday night's Abilene Author Showcase at the downtown Abilene Public Library as part of this year's West Texas Book Festival. Vicky had her own table, at which her book, "The Curse of the Stone," was sold.



Posted: 9:00 p.m.

Published author, 11, reflects on her long career

Vicky Gao thinks back to a book she wrote when she was younger, "The Super Power Girls." Reading that work now, she finds it "childish."

Vicky is 11.

The Craig Middle School sixth-grader was spotlighted Tuesday night as a locally published author at this year's West Texas Book Festival. Yes, she was the youngest author in the room.

Her latest book is "The Curse of the Stone." It's 245 pages and self-published. Not quite Stephen King territory but in this day of 144-character limit per tweet, darn impressive. Book festival organizer Glenn Dromgoole, who gave his 2-minute sales pitch just before Vicky, is fond of writing much shorter works. "The Curse of the Stone" would be at least three writing projects for him.

Vicky herself is equally impressive — a mature, polite, confident and funny young lady. She is one of three children in the Gao family. Her brother, 5-year-old James, followed her around the main Abilene Public Library on Tuesday. Her sister, 2-year-old Christina, stayed with their mother, Wei. Mom is an accountant at Hardin-Simmons University, where their father, Fei, is an assistant professor of finance. They moved here in 2010 from Pullman, Washington, home of Washington State University.

You would guess correctly they are Asian-Americans, and that plays significantly into Vicky's life. Each summer, the family travels to China, where her parents met, to visit his parents and two aunts.

It's a long trip via the Pacific Ocean, one she understands more clearly now that she is studying geography in middle school.

It was during a visit in 2014 that she came across something stuck to a pole. She first thought it might be gum — how else would it stay in place? But it was a stone.

"I thought, 'That's odd. How is it supported?'" Vicky said. Her imagination took that unusual sight and ran with it.

In her book, orphaned twin brother and sister Aerida and Aegilus find strange stones, which transport them to a another world. There, they

discover they have magical powers. They make friends, who tag along, and obtain dragons, eventually setting off on a fantastic quest. But the stones are cursed and the four tasks they must accomplish — including forging a sword with great power — not only are almost impossible, they must be done within seven days. (Think doing your tax return a week before April 15 without TurboTax.)

If the siblings fail, they die.

"I tried to have suspense in it," Vicky said. Yes, facing death does up the ante.

I know what you are thinking? How very Potteresque. Harry vs. Lord Voldemort and all that.

You are right. And are you surprised? J.K. Rowling's series has ignited imaginations from Abilene to Zhengzhou.

Vicky said the Potter books — "The Goblet of Fire" is her favorite — were part of her inspiration, having read the entire series years ago.

"One after another," she said. That was the year she was a 7-million-word reader; each May, Abilene ISD students are honored for having read 1 million words. Her mother said that as a fourth-grader, her daughter read 11 million words.

Vicky giggled at the suggestion that she reads a lot. When does she have time to draw and to learn to play the music of South Korean pianist/composer Yiruma (her favorite, who began serious study at 10)?

Her book took a year to write. She said she sometimes wrote with great motivation but other times was "down about it."

"I gave up on previous books but I stuck with it," she said. (Vicky, it has happened to all us of would-be authors ...)

Was she excited when she saw her book in paperback arrive at her home?

"The first time a shipment came, I was screaming with excitement," she said. "And that's not an exaggeration."

Her mother, she said, beamed at the sight.

Vicky paused and shared a dark secret: Neither parent, she said, has read her book "in its entirety."

There was a hint of disapproval in her smile.

Vicky has read it three times but acknowledged "it got boring" the fourth time.

A friend her age back in Pullman read it and said it "was one of her favorite books." Like, ever.

Vicky is intent on not being a one-hit wonder, like Harper Lee of "To Kill a Mockingbird" fame.

She is 50 or so pages into a new adventure, this one titled "The Scent." A girl (of course) has the ability to sniff out a person's inner scent. So, if she smells apple, you probably have good taste and make good decision. If she smells cherry blossom, you are sweet. If she smells something foul, you might be a presidential candidate ...

That scent ability will come in handy when she faces off with the bad guys, called Headers, and their robot minions on her quest for a prize.

Vicky has been writing since she was 7.

"I wasn't publishing then," she said, matter-of-factly.

She said she probably will look back in three to five years at "The Curse of the Stone" and view it with more discernment. By then, she may be on The New York Times' best-seller list.

"I'll ask myself, 'Why did I write that?'" she said.

Her book has a happy ending. Readers want happy endings, she said, sounding very much like the veteran author she is. The other authors in the room Tuesday, especially those writing romance novels, would agree.

What's it like to have an author in class, a superpower girl?

"What a talented, delightful little girl," said Debra Smith, Vicky's language arts teacher at Craig for just six weeks. "She converses as well with adults as she does her peers — she is so social in presenting herself. Of course, she's an excellent writer and she's already a million-word reader. She said she read only 8 million words last year because fifth grade was harder. But she is well-balanced."

Vicky said it would be totally cool if "The Curse of the Stone" became an accepted accelerated reading book in schools.

"I wonder if they'd let me take an AR test on it," she said.

Read 'The Curse of the Stone'

"The Curse of the Stone" by Vicky Gao is available on Amazon.com — \$3.99 on Kindle and \$10.99 for the paperback. It's rated "word wise" appropriate for ages 8-14. A copy has been placed in the library at Taylor Elementary School, which Vicky previously attended, and one is being added at Craig Middle School, where she is a sixth-grader.

Meet Vicky Gao

Victoria "Vicky" Gao joined other locally published authors in giving a 2-minute talk Tuesday night at a West Texas Book Festival event at the downtown Abilene Public Library. Barely able to see over the podium, she was given a stool on which to stand. Hear her presentation at www.reporternews.com

IF YOU GO:

What: West Texas Book Festival

Thursday: The Culinary Cuisine Luncheon and Texas Cookbook Gala are both sold out.

Friday: Lunch at the Library featuring Chad Conine, author of “The Republic of Football: Legends of the Texas High School Game.”

Noon. Abilene Public Library. Free. Getting Published Workshop, 2-3:30 p.m., Abilene Public Library. Free.

Saturday: Author Presentations, 8-11:30 a.m. Abilene Civic Center.

Free. Books & Boots Luncheon, 11:45 a.m. The reservation deadline has passed.



About Greg Jaklewicz

Greg Jaklewicz is the editorial page editor/columnist for the Abilene Reporter-News.

[@GregJaklewicz](#)

greg.jaklewicz@reporter...

[325-676-6764](tel:325-676-6764)

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